

[Disciples of Christ], Church of the Brethren, Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church in America, Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church [USA], United Church of Christ and The United Methodist Church. In addition, The Orthodox Church in America and The Greek Orthodox Church are participants in this two-year process.

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BELIEVERS' BAPTISM CONFERENCE ON BEM

On June 5-8, 1984 about sixty persons from fifteen different communions in the United States and Canada met at Anderson, Indiana, USA, to discuss "Believers' Baptism and the Meaning of Church Membership." The Anderson School of Theology hosted the meeting and co-sponsored it with the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Bethany Theological Seminary and Christian Theological Seminary.

The seventh in a series of believers' church conferences guided by a committee on continuing conversations dating back to 1964, the purpose of this conference was to offer an opportunity to examine and respond to the document, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry [BEM], of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. The five-page conference report, which was forwarded to the Faith and Order Secretariat, made clear that this "interdenominational cluster of academicians and church leaders" had no ecclesial status and that those participating did so voluntarily and without delegated responsibility. Participants were from the following denominations: American Baptist Churches in the USA, The Christian Church [Disciples of Christ], Church of the Brethren, Church of Christ, Church of God [Anderson, Indiana], Independent Christian Churches Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite Church, Mennonites [General Conference], Presbyterian Church [USA], Roman Catholic Church, Seventh Day Adventist Church, Society of Friends, Southern Baptist Church, Union of French Baptists.

The conference was able to accomplish the consensus represented by its report because of the strong spirit of Christian community experienced throughout, the hard work of the participants and especially of the drafting committee [Everett Ferguson, Denny Weaver, Nelson Thomson], the small group

discussions, and Dr. John W. V. Smith and the hospitality of the Anderson School of Theology. The conference convened each morning with worship and prayers in the Miller Chapel, had its meals at the Olt Student Center of Anderson College and met in the assembly room of the Warner Press. Significant addresses were presented on the topic "Our Doctrine of Baptism and the Meaning of Church Membership" by President Marlin Miller of Goshen Biblical Seminary; Prof. Dale Brown of Bethany Theological Seminary; Prof. Timothy George of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Prof. Merle Strege of the Anderson School of Theology; Pastor William Soetenga; Dr. Howard E. Short, Distinguished Editor Emeritus, Christian Board of Education; Prof. Earl West of the Harding Graduate School of Religion; and Prof. Hugh Barbour of Earlham College.

Other "presenters" at the conference were Dean Lewis Mudge of McCormick Theological Seminary, who discussed the process that eventuated in BEM, and Dean Louis Weeks of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, who spoke of the spiritual significance of pedo-baptism. Dr. Michael Kinnamon of Christian Theological Seminary spoke of the ecclesial significance of BEM which pertained to the meaning of being the church, not to doctrinal reconciliation or organic unity. Prof. Lauree Hersch Meyer of Bethany Theological Seminary challenged the conference to let BEM be a teaching tool of the Holy Spirit to challenge our traditions. Jeffrey Gros, Director of the Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches, brought a Roman Catholic perspective to the proceedings of the conference.

Presenters exposed lines both of theological convergence and divergence among participants and informed us how our histories have shaped our various traditions. Dale Brown observed that since the sixteenth century when believers' baptism was also a counter-cultural act with regard to which one "counted the cost," there has been a shift to a soteriological focus with a resultant pressure to baptize at an earlier age. Timothy George documented this trend among Southern Baptists, where the average age at baptism is now eight. He challenged this trend, calling for the association of baptism with a covenantal and radical life-style. In his opening address Prof. John Howard Yoder of Goshen Biblical Seminary had stressed believers' baptism as witness to a Christian way of being in the world, and this was clearly central to the consensus of the conference.

Other significant theological motifs received expression also. Marlin Miller stressed the variety in anabaptist theology, including the view that personal regeneration precedes baptism and that that divine-human reality is what baptism signifies. Merle Strege and William Soetenga pointed out that where the theological stress is on the unity and holiness of the church, regeneration makes one a member of the church universal with a consequent de-emphasis on the sacramentality and ecclesiastical necessity of baptism. Hugh

Barbour pointed out that the Friends tradition stresses the sacramental quality of all Christians as of Christ's ministry itself but does not speak of specific sacramental rites. Such considerations as these were representative of the theological diversity in the believers' churches.

This diversity was given expression in the conference report, which directly addressed each of the four points upon which response was requested in the Preface to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. In its extensive use of biblical vocabulary and imagery in paragraphs 1-10 [though the report noted this ceases at paragraph 11] and in the identification of baptism with church membership, with ongoing nurture and growth and with a new moral commitment, the conference recognized the apostolic faith in BEM. However, in view of theological diversity among believers' churches it found this recognition more difficult concerning BEM's attitude toward churches which practice infant baptism and concerning its silence on the active role of the baptized participant, the relation of this to the " 'ordination' of all believers to the Christian ministry," and with reference to discipline.

The conference found BEM helpful for their churches' own understanding as partners in conversation with other churches and noted a number of ways believers' churches can be guided by BEM. In light of these statements, however, the conferees did not feel it was necessary that they formally recommend study of BEM to their churches. The report made many specific suggestions for the ongoing work of Faith and Order, some of which were that the broadly consultative process be continued and that it include representation from various believers' churches, that simplicity in sacramental and liturgical practice is the tendency of Scripture, and that a more explicit acknowledgement of diverse views of Scripture and tradition be included in future statements. The report concluded: "We recognize the integrity of the particular baptismal traditions in their contexts, without at the same time accepting their universal validity."

As one of four participants who were not from believers churches [I am a Presbyterian], I might conclude here by recording my grateful [but not unmixed] feelings at having been so cordially accepted as a brother in Christ on the basis of my profession of faith but not my baptism. The conference helped me comprehend the irony in this and to appreciate it as a product of our diverse histories and interpretations. The irony discloses a theological puzzle at the heart of our ecumenical relations. Might this puzzle be addressed constructively in the best way by reducing stress on baptism and increasing stress on church discipline where all of our churches need to advance together? In any case, I felt this was the distinct thrust of this important conference.

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